

NY Senators & Tri-State Reps. Request 9/11 Health Care Funding in President's Budget

Wednesday, 05 September 2007

Washington, D.C. – Today, Senators Charles Schumer (D-NY), Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) and Reps. Carolyn Maloney (D-NY), Jerrold Nadler (D-NY), Vito Fossella (R-NY), Ed Towns (D-NY), Christopher Shays (R-CT) and Frank Pallone (D-NJ) sent a joint letter (click here for a copy of the letter) to Jim Nussle, the incoming Director of the Office of Management and Budget, urging him to include adequate funding for the World Trade Center (WTC) Responder Health Program in the President's budget for Fiscal Year 2009.

In January 2007, the Administration announced that the President's FY08 budget would request \$25 million for the health needs of WTC Responders. At that time, then-OMB Director Rob Portman stated that the \$25 million was intended to serve as a "placeholder" until the Administration could prepare a comprehensive plan and more accurately determine the level of funding needed. However, the Administration has yet to release either its plan or its re-evaluated funding request.

"The Administration needs to fully fund without further delay the health care, treatment, and testing of the thousands of selfless first responders who didn't hesitate for a moment to answer our nation's call for help in the days, weeks, and months after 9/11," said Senator Schumer. "With the sixth anniversary of 9/11 fast approaching, the federal government must step up to the plate and give these heroes the help and support they need and deserve."

"A continuing tragedy of 9/11 is the illness and suffering that is being experienced by our first responders, workers and volunteers. Sustained funding is critically needed to take care of those who are suffering. The Administration needs to make good on its commitment to provide adequate federal funding to cover all who are ill," Senator Clinton said.

"We are asking the President to follow through on his commitment to care for the thousands of 9/11 responders who are sick as a direct result of their service to our country," said Rep. Maloney. "The WTC Responder Health Program needs both adequate funding and Presidential leadership to keep its doors open."

"We have learned a lot in the six years since 9/11," said Rep. Nadler. "We have learned that the air was not safe to breathe, that the EPA has performed an inadequate test and clean program, and that thousands of first responders, residents, area workers and students that were exposed to the toxins released on 9/11 have become ill. Unfortunately, we have also come to understand that the federal response to their needs has been insufficient and the White House has been missing in action since it first proposed a fraction of the funds needed in its formal budget request. We are asking the White House to exercise the leadership necessary to request and secure proper funding for programs that will meet the health needs of the exposed community."

Rep. Fossella said, "It is critical that a steady stream of funding be available to ensure that our first responders continue to have access to medical monitoring and treatment. The \$25 million was a starting point until a comprehensive analysis could be performed to determine a more exact amount of funding that would be needed. America's unsung heroes risked their own lives and health in responding to the 9/11 attacks. We have a responsibility to ensure that those who are sick or injured get the care they need."

"Those first responders and residents who are suffering from all types of respiratory illnesses are relying heavily on the WTC Responder Health Program. It is necessary that the President keep his promise and fully fund this project," said Congressman Towns.

"For years, efforts to create an organized, effective health plan system for first responders to Ground Zero have been incomplete and uncoordinated. Much work needs to be done to ensure those affected receive the care they deserve, and I hope the administration will fulfill its commitment to those exposed to the toxins from September 11, 2001, and in the resulting cleanup," said Congressman Shays.

"Six years of administration foot dragging must end," Pallone said. "The Bush administration needs to live up to its promises to provide critical funds for monitoring and treating 9/11 rescue and recovery workers. I would hope that the new OMB Director would take his predecessor's promises to heart, and would request the necessary funds to begin the process of helping the workers who accepted the call to serve their nation after its darkest day."

The letter from the NY Senators and Tri-State Reps to Jim Nussle Follows:

"As the sixth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks approaches, we write to urge you to carefully consider the President's Fiscal Year 2009 budget request for the World Trade Center (WTC) Responder Health Program, which has been providing much-needed medical care to the heroes and heroines of 9/11.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent collapse of the World Trade Center Towers produced the largest acute environmental disaster that ever befell New York City. Thousands of people were exposed to toxins, pulverized building materials, and other environmental contaminants in the air. Thousands of heroic responders, who rushed in to help as all others were running the other way, have become sick as a result of their work at Ground Zero. Many area residents, workers, and students are sick as well. The number of ailing 9/11 rescue and recovery workers is increasing, workers' illnesses are becoming more severe, the projected cost of treating these illnesses is surging, and current federal treatment funding levels are likely inadequate.

The WTC Responder Health Program, which is administered by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), provides federal funds to ensure that monitoring and treatment will continue for World Trade Center responders. It currently does not provide services for residents, area workers and students. The services are provided by two Centers of Excellence: the New York City Fire Department Bureau of Health Services World Trade Center Medical Monitoring and Treatment Program ("FDNY") and the consortium of clinical providers coordinated by Mt. Sinai ("the Consortium"). Serving over 37,000 responders since 2002, FDNY and the Consortium have gained significant expertise in screening, monitoring, diagnosing, and treating WTC responders. Through extensive data collection and analysis, they have contributed much to the understanding of WTC-related illnesses, including prevalence, diagnosis, and treatment of these otherwise little-understood conditions.

To date, funding for the responder's health needs has come in four waves, all through emergency spending. An initial \$12 million for screening started the program in FY 2002, followed by \$90 million for monitoring which was appropriated in FY 2004. A FY 2006 \$75 million appropriation included the first money made available for treatment.

Most recently, \$50 million was included in the U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Care, Katrina Recovery, and Iraq Accountability Appropriations Act, 2007. None of the funds used to monitor or treat those exposed to Ground Zero toxins and suffering from health effects have ever been initially proposed by the Administration, and in fact many of these funds were appropriated over the Administration's objections.

The President's FY08 budget requested \$25 million for the health needs of WTC responders. This was only in response

to a strong bipartisan push by New York delegation members after it became abundantly clear that the Administration was not planning to request any funds whatsoever. At the time, it was stated in the press and personally by then-Director Rob Portman, that this \$25 million figure was only a placeholder until the Administration could prepare a comprehensive plan and more accurately determine the higher, more appropriate level of funding needed. However, the plan and the reevaluated funding request never came from the Administration, and six years after 9/11, WTC responders, residents, area workers, and students are still in desperate need of care.

As the number of registered responders increases, the percent of responders needing treatment increases, and the intensity of their illness increases, it is probable that the costs for these services will increase. In addition, none of these funds have been made available to provide monitoring or treatment to the exposed community, including area residents, area workers and students.

So, as you begin to prepare the FY09 budget, we respectfully request an update on what level of funding you anticipate seeking for the care of WTC responders. Thank you for your attention to this matter. We anxiously await your response."

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